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SUBJECT: NIGERIAN POLICE GAS PROTESTORS, IGNORE SUPREME COURT

REF: ABUJA 1153

1. (U) On December 16, over two hundred mostly professional women calling themselves the Concerned Mothers of Nigeria gathered at the Sheraton Hotel in Lagos to protest perceived GON negligence in handling the recent Bellview and Sosoliso Airlines airplane crashes. Attempting to force the protestors to disperse, police teargassed the non-violent group, three of whom, including the daughter-in-law of a former Chief Justice, went to a local hospital for treatment of injuries sustained during the protest.

2. (U) Police Inspector General, Sunday Ehindero, cut short a trip to Edo State to personally apologize to Lagosians for the heavy-handedness of the action, as well as to report the arrest of all policemen involved. At the same time, he called the protest "illegal" since the organizers did not apply for a permit. Ehindero did well as a politician apologizing for what most Nigerians see as an egregious action taken against well-meaning women. However, as a lawyer claiming the protest was illegal, he stumbled. In June (reftel), the Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional to require a permit as a prerequisite to peaceful protests. Lagos State Governor Bola Tinubu and Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka have publicly called for an investigation.

3. (SBU) Comment. There was no reason to take such brusque action. To do so against a group that included some of Lagos's distinguished women only compounded the error. Police dissatisfaction with the June Supreme Court verdict was clear from the moment of the announcement of the decision. Now, some policemen have openly flouted the ruling. We will get a good idea for how well the new leadership of police -- Ehindero has been at the helm just a few months -- respects the rule of law. Ehindero erred when he called the protest illegal. For the sake of human rights in Nigeria, activists and attorneys hope he will correct that error and initiate an investigation that will serve as a deterrent to future mistreatment of peaceful demonstrators. End Comment.
BROWNE